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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FEMINISM GOES MAINSTREAM?
Feminist Themes in Mainstream Popular Music in Sweden and Denmark

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, feminist scholars have turned their attention to the seeming resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture. This resurgence coincides with a rise in feminist activism, as testified by the many campaigns that have mobilized millions of people around the issues of violence against women, sexual harassment, reproductive injustice, and abortion rights. This article draws on the literature on the cultural consequences of social movements to explore if and how the new wave of grassroot feminist activism influenced feminist themes in top-charting mainstream popular music. We conducted a thematic analysis of the lyrics of all female-performed songs in the Swedish Top-60 and Danish Top-40 between 2017 and 2018. Our results show that neoliberal feminist themes count for the majority of the feminist themes detected. However, performers also employed themes ascribable to radical and liberal feminist traditions. We conclude with some reflections on the commercialization of feminist messages, pointing to openings for further research.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Outcomes; Feminisms; Mainstream Popular Music; Neoliberal feminism; Social Movements; Thematic Analysis.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars have called attention to a resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture. In opposition to the rather fierce repudiation of feminism performed by at least two generations of young women at the turn of the 1990s (Butler 1992; McRobbie 2004) it seems we moved back to a feminist moment, in which feminism not only still seems necessary but also increasingly mainstream (Rottenberg 2018). Contributing to this revival is the fact that feminism has been presented proudly by popular icons like Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. A heated debate sprung up around the performances of such artists, the strengths or contradictions of their articulation and embodiment of feminism (Halberstam 2012; Weidhase, 2015; Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz and Solano-Caballero, 2018) Co-occurring with the resurgence of "celebrity feminism" (Hollows 2000), the last decade has also seen the rise of feminist campaigns across the globe, such as the "Ni Una Menos" campaign started in Argentina in 2015 that quickly propagated in neighbour countries and Europe; protests following in the wake of the #metoo initiative; mobilizations against reproductive injustice and the denial of abortion rights; and many others.

These two contemporary manifestations of feminism are often described – by artists and activists themselves – by imagining a "spectrum of feminism" (Annie Lennox, in Weidhase 2015) where celebrity feminists stay at one end and feminists working at the grassroots represent the other. In fact, the new "pop", "mainstream" version of feminism has been highly criticized for urging women to "lean in", "find their true potential" and "let go of their inhibitions", rather than act collectively for political change, thus repackaging the critique of unequal gender relations as an individual grievance. The critical argument goes on, highlighting how claims for individual-based empowerment coexist with all kinds of inequalities, including, paradoxically, gender inequalities (Farhall 2015; Keller and Ringrose 2015; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2004; Miller and Plencner 2018; Rivers 2017; Rottenberg 2018). In explaining the emergence of what has been defined as neoliberal feminism some critics have argued that its success is the result of a mechanism of co-optation, through which certain aspects of feminist discourse have been included in the strategy of social legitimation and cultural hegemony artfully crafted by the project of cognitive capitalism. In the words of Nancy Fraser, this "dangerous liaison" between feminism and neoliberalism was "an

unfortunate coincidence" in history forced by the hegemony of the neoliberal project (Fraser 2013; 2016).

We foresee at least two ways of approaching *how* neoliberalism has co-opted feminism in mainstream culture. As already anticipated, authors coming from critical traditions argue that in a moment of prominent liberalization of the capitalist economy, neoliberalism has found its ally in a liberalized form of feminism, which has dissolved its solidaristic vision of emancipation into a "female individualism", namely the idea that women are free to emancipate themselves by *competing* –in education, in the workplace and everywhere – as new privileged subjects of meritocracy (McRobbie 2004). Thus, neoliberal feminism is a by-product of capitalism, as it furnishes ideological legitimation for the exploitation of (mainly) middle-class, professional women (Rottenberg, 2018). A simple adaptation to a new context, if we consider that since its onset, capitalism has exploited and mobilized gender inequalities for its own ends, at the same time influencing social gender norms (Federici 2015 [1998]). The needs of liberalized market and economic growth during the neoliberal period has loosened some patriarchal chains to allow, on the one hand new forms of women's exploitation, on the other hand the construction of a veil of legitimation around the neoliberal project.

Taking a different perspective, research on the cultural outcomes of social movements posits that social movements may affect cultural production indirectly, e.g. by creating market demand and by attracting performers to draw from new themes and discourses (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Isaac 2009). As Caiani and Padoan noted in the introduction of this special issue, "music can also, sometimes decisively, contribute to the dissemination of knowledge produced by a movement (della Porta and Pavan, 2017), and it is often a substantial part of such knowledge" (intro SI: 16). In this way, neoliberal feminism can be seen as a partial and unintended consequence of feminist mobilization, to the extent that discourses created within social movement spheres of action are then propagated within the cultural field through the actions of cultural entrepreneurs. Neoliberal feminism can thus be seen as emerging within the space between movement, performers and markets that has been opened by more radical forms of feminist activism. While the latter argument does not deny the structural

basis of contemporary neoliberal feminism, it also allows us to see how progressive social movements impact on the dynamics of the cultural mainstream, thus moving beyond a tradition that locate social movements' cultural outcomes only in the subcultural scene. As such, it allows for a more complex understanding of how feminism is manifested in mainstream culture, one that does not perceive it simply as a legitimizing discourse, but as a contradictory combination of reactive and emancipatory themes.

There is no inherent contradiction between the two lines of argument. In fact, in the last decades, social movement theory has increasingly abandoned linear understandings of the consequences of social movements. Instead, contemporary authors consider social movements to produce effects through complex interactions among contenders and authorities, thereby blurring the distinction between movements' intended effects and those produced by co-optation (Bosi, Giugni & Uba 2016). On the other hand, this opens up new avenues for research on how social movement messages are embedded in popular culture, despite the reality of commercialization and co-optation effects. Such research is important for gaining a better understanding of the cultural implications of contemporary feminisms outside of politicized subcultures, and for avoiding monolithic and stereotypical depictions of mainstream culture.

This paper explores the variation of pop cultural feminism in political environments characterized by a long and successful trajectories of feminist movements, by examining the thematic content of top-charting songs in Sweden and Denmark in 2017 and 2018. We purposefully choose the two cases since they are characterized by a configuration of factors that, we assume, can influence the presence and varieties of feminist themes in the popular musical fields: long histories of comparatively successful feminist mobilization within and outside cultural and political institutions (Peterson, Thörn & Wahlström 2018), large domestic cultural production, and recent cycles of feminist mobilization.

First, we ask: are feminist themes present in mainstream pop music, as the literature on neoliberal feminism suggests? Second, if present, what types of feminist themes are there, and how do they connect to existing feminist traditions? We find that feminist themes are a minor presence in both countries, although more prominently in Sweden.

In line with existing literature on feminism and popular culture, we also find that the themes used in the lyrics are dominated by neoliberal appeals to self-empowerment, although intersecting with themes attributable to liberal and radical feminist traditions. Future research should determine whether this can be attributed to the potential influence of contemporary activism, and extend the comparative breadth of the project.

The paper begins with a background section in which we develop our argument on the connection between the mainstream cultural sphere and social movement cultural outcomes, taking into consideration two different literatures: the cultural sociology of popular music, and the literature on social movement consequences. We then present our original dataset and analytical method, including emergent themes. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis. We conclude with some reflections and suggestions for future research.

2. Background: Mainstream culture as a social movement outcome

2.1 Mainstream?

What are we talking about, when diagnosing the penetration of feminist themes into "the mainstream"? In the vernacular use of the term, "mainstream culture" refers to the ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional, with a certain degree of conformity. We draw from this common understanding of the mainstream when we refer to "mainstream culture" as, in the last instance, a field of cultural consumption and production catering to large and varied audiences. Beyond differences in size, consumption in the mainstream requires few cultural resources (such as the knowledge of subcultural codes), and it is thereby accessible to larger sections of the population (Laing 2015). Speaking of mainstream popular music, we refer to "popular forms of music, usually stylistically heterogeneous, situated in the sociocultural context of a late modern global capitalism" (Baker, Bennett and Taylor 2013: viii). For its heterogeneity and flexibility,

the mainstream is sometimes criticized as a valid category for cultural studies (Thornton 1995), to the extent that its usefulness lies only in its opposition to the "subcultural" field (Huber 2013).

In empirical and historical terms, the boundaries between "subculture" and "mainstream" are often blurred. The question of how cultural and political subversion is commercialized and sold as mainstream products, and what happens to them in the process, has long engaged Marxist scholars. Researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CSSS) at the University of Birmingham explored at length the mainstream-subculture dialectic, or "class struggle in and over culture" (Hall 2009). Rejecting the pessimistic claims of the Frankfurt School, considering the mass-produced aspects of popular music as cultural hegemonic elements in the hands of the bourgeoisie, the CCCS re-evaluated popular music as a "potentially subversive resource when placed in the hands of working-class audiences" (Bennett 2008: 423). Even though the field broadened significantly over the years, popular music studies' main focus remains subcultures and their style, meaning, practices and reception (e.g. Bennett 1999; Duncombe 1997; Rose 1994; Thornton 1995;)[1].

In contrast to this tendency, recent scholarship re-valuated the mainstream as a central site within the popular cultural field, with significant cultural value, and "thus one that is in urgent need of detailed consideration" (Baker, Bennett and Taylor 2013: ix; see also Appen et al., 2015); also observing a dynamic interplay between subcultural and mainstream cultural forms. An account of this dynamic was already provided by classical works on subcultures. For example, Dick Hebdige (1979) illustrates the constant traffic through which the mainstream borrows from subcultural expressions, and how this inclusion triggers the creation of new alternative cultures. More recent contributions have shown how this 'traffic' usually does not take place on equal terms but rather asserts mainstream dominance. As Maskell notes in her analysis on the controversial feminist legacy of the Riot Grrrls "historically, subcultures and social

[1] For works on music and feminist subcultures see Morris (2015) on the women's music movement and the DIY experience of the Olivia Records; also, on the Riot Grrrls and the feminist third wave see Maskell (2013).

movements, […] have been 'adopted' by the mainstream in order to negate the power or threat such marginalized communities held" (Maskell 2013, p. 195). But there is also an arrow of influence pointing in the other direction, from movements to the mainstream.

2.2 Cultural consequences of social movements

The broader and often unintentional impact social movements have on beliefs, identities and symbolic production is addressed by research on the cultural consequences of social movements (Amenta and Polletta 2019). This sub-field forms part of the wider study of social movement outcomes, which also includes research on how social movements shape politics and policy, and how social movements shape individual biographies (see Amenta, Caren, Chiarello and Su 2010; Bosi, Giugni and Uba 2016; Vestergren, Drury and Hammar Chiriac 2017). In the literature, cultural outcomes are often considered the least researched. This is due in part to its "harrowly enigmatic dependent variable" (Earl, 2004: 511), owing to the "limited and fragmented" use of concepts of culture in the social movement literature more broadly (Ullrich, Daphi and Baumgarten 2015: 5). Even within the literature on cultural consequences, there is thus a range of individual areas of study, including social movements' impact on collectively held beliefs, values, and memories (e.g. Banaszak and Ondercin 2016; Daphi and Zamponi 2019), broader worldviews and identities (Rochon 1998), and cultural and symbolic production, such as literary genres and styles of language (Earl 2004).

Our current focus is on social movements' impact on mainstream popular music, i.e. an instance of cultural production. We will briefly review those major contributions that have pushed forward the research agenda on this specific topic, broadening our gaze beyond mainstream popular music to include other cultural media. Within this very limited literature, authors have studied the US labour movement's impact on realist fiction (Isaac, 2009), second wave feminism and lifestyle magazines (Farrell 1995), popular music and 20th century social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1998), and the civil rights movement and American children's books (Pescosolido, Grauerholz and Milkie 1997). Without direct reference to social movement theory, but with similar

understanding of the link between political mobilization and cultural production, are Kaplan (1992) on art and social protest in early 20th century Catalonia, Peloff (2011) on female public profiles in US mass media and second wave feminism, and Friedman (2013) on protest songs and their connection with social movements since the nineteenth century to date.

Isaac's (2009) account of the American Labour Problem Novel (LPN) makes the most sophisticated contribution to a theory of how social movements affect cultural genres. Combining the theories of ecologist and institutionalist cultural sociology with social movement theory, he links the emergence of the LPN to changes in publishing laws, the growth and growing contentiousness of the labour movement, and the increasing prominence of realist aesthetics, which combined in a dialogical relationship between writers, the literature market, and contentious politics. Isaac argues that the "labour movement, and the collective resistance it encountered, induced a new discursive 'space'" (Isaac 2009: 946), which attracted pro- and anti-labour writers to portray workplace conflict. It thereby "constructed and circulated movement grievances, strategies, collective characterizations, and identities in ways that were relatively autonomous of social movement organizations" (Ibidem: 957).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) agree that social movements open up cultural spaces, i.e. "creative, or experimental, arenas for the practicing of new forms of social and cognitive action", "carved out of existent contexts" (p. 21). This act of opening spaces occurs dialogically between movements, markets, and artists, the latter ranging from "movement intellectuals" such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie to countercultural performers such as Janis Joplin or Jimi Hendrix. "In both form and content", the authors argue, "some popular music in the 1960s could function as another kind of social theory, translating the political radicalism that was expressed by relatively small coteries of critical intellectuals and political activists into a much different and far more accessible idiom. Like theory, the best popular songs of the time identified social problems, gave names to vague feelings of alienation and oppression, and even offered explanations, albeit in poetic terms" (ibidem: 139). Similarly, Friedman's (2013) contribution addresses the impact of social protest music on society, considering the latter as functions of broader political movements. The musical movements covered in the edited volume vary greatly according to the context – from nineteenth-century African American anti-slavery music, to the 1990s Riot Grrrls – and the degree of direct connection to protest, but they all share a leitmotif, that is "addressing societal wrongs

whether based on race, gender, or class and at the same time offering solutions or comfort" (ibidem: IV). In summing up the results of the different contributions, Friedman concludes that "[p]erformance is clearly a potent medium for spreading and making accessible what otherwise might be problematic and unpopular. [protest] song's poetry and music can change reality, maybe not by immediately resulting in changes in law, but by having a deeper impact on the society that makes laws" (ibidem: XV).

In summary, the literature views the impact of social movements on cultural production as an unintentional consequence of contention, as social movements open up creative spaces between contention, cultural fields, and markets. Thus, Pescosolido and colleagues (1997) linked the decline of Black representation in children's books in the 1960s to market uncertainty in the context of intense contention on racial issues, while the unprecedented growth of Black representation after the peak of contention relates to the increasing acknowledgement of Black writers as legitimate artists. Farrell, in turn, related the collapse of *Ms. Magazine* to its failure to balance a feminist readership with an increasingly conservative commercial environment (2015). It is therefore crucial not only to see *if* social movements have an impact on cultural production, but if so, *how* their impact is translated into cultural products.

3. Analytical strategy and data

We purposefully focus on Sweden and Denmark because the two countries present an influential configuration of factors that may give a leeway for a variety of feminist themes to resonate in popular music, a cultural medium frequently described as mainstream (Baker, Bennett and Taylor, 2013). Both countries present long histories of feminist mobilization, although in recent years Denmark has experienced a waning in interest for feminism (Peterson, Thörn and Wahlström 2018; Mikkelsen 2018, but see Dahlerup 2018). Indicators usually consider the two countries at the forefront for pursuing gender equality and human development, and both are characterized by a long-lasting political commitment to women's rights in high-profile political statements

and programs, partially as a consequence of the early institutionalization of some strands of the feminist movement (Peterson, Thörn and Wahlström 2018). Most importantly, feminist mobilizations continue to be present in both countries. In particular, during the period under study the #metoo protests were salient in both countries and present in public opinion (if more so in Sweden, see Askanius and Møller 2019), alongside domestic feminist mobilizations. Particularly active in the cultural field, in 2018 Swedish feminists organized the country's first women's and queer-only mainstream music festival in response to reports of sexual violence at public gatherings and cultural events[2]. The same year, the Swedish government passed a law on sexual consent, long fought for by feminist activists (Carlsson Tenitskaja and Svensson 2018; Thurfjell 2018). Finally, both countries have considerable domestic cultural industries (the Atlantic 2013). The two cases, thus, can be considered as two "influential cases" (Seawright and Gerring, 2008), in that they present a influential, not common, configuations of indipendent variables that can likely infuence the presence of our outcome, i.e., the variety of feminist themes.

The empirical section is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of lyrics performed by Nordic female-identified artists (or female-fronted groups) appearing on Swedish and Danish weekly charts for sales and streams in 2017 and 2018, as reported by each country's recording industry association. The restriction of the sample to Nordic and female-identified artists is based on two theoretical assumptions. First, we assume that it is primarily among domestic artists that the impact of domestic social movements will be most prominent. Thus, while feminist movements exist worldwide, their current state in the given settings will be most likely to affect the production and consumption of artists active within that country. Second, we assume that it is among female artists that feminist themes will be most visible. In doing so, we are not excluding the possibility that men artists are precluded to adopt a feminist discourse. Simply, we draw on the evidence that in most of the cases, it's female artists that tend to portray themselves as feminist. By making these restrictions, we also keep the dataset manageable for qualitative analysis.

[2] Info available at https://www.statementfestival.se/en. Accessed on 3rd January 2020.

To produce the sample of songs, we first collected the weekly top-40 rankings (top-60 for Sweden) for aggregated sales and streams as reported by the recording industry association in each country[3]. We then compiled a list of every unique song appearing at least once in each chart. Finally, we sampled songs performed – in full or in part – by female-identified Nordic (i.e. Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Finnish) artists and groups. In total, Nordic artists were represented in approximately one third of all songs in the dataset. The number was slightly higher in Denmark (40 %) than in Sweden (26 %). Out of the 371 songs performed by Nordic artists, 86, or 23 %, were performed by female or female-fronted performers. Among these, 72 were Swedish, 13 were Danish, and one was Norwegian.

We employ thematic analysis on our corpus of songs. As defined by Boyatzis (1999) thematic analysis is a "process for encoding qualitative information" (ibidem: 4), where the identifications of "themes", serves as a way to identify, encode and interpret different patterns in heterogeneous data. More than a method *per sè*, thematic analysis is well understood as an analytical strategy, which allows for a lot of flexibility in the analysis, as well as to keep together both deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. In addition, thematic analysis it is not bounded to the semantic interpretation of the text, but it admits the identification of latent themes and the employment of both during the coding procedure (ibidem: 16).

In the first step, we did a line by line coding of the entire dataset, using NVivo software. We then aggregated all the codes inductively produced into a smaller number of thematic categories, subnodes. The subnodes included expressions of economic insecurity, of heartbreak, political oppression, and so on (see table 1 below). Each of these subnodes, we found, could also be coded into particular relational

[3] For Sweden, we have used Digilistan (https://sverigesradio.se/sida/topplista.aspx?programid=2697), which is based on reporting from IFPI Sweden. For Denmark, we have used Hitlisten (http://www.hitlisten.nu/), based on reporting from IFPI Denmark.

settings, as e.g. economic insecurity could be located to individual experience, the experience of a couple, or something more general. Finally, we coded whether each subnode made use of gendered categories, e.g. if a romantic relationship was gendered or not.

Table 1. Themes detected in the lyrics

"Problems" themes	"Solutions" themes
1) Being wronged (e.g. cheating, mistrust)	1) Economic empowerment
2) Fatalism, hopelessness, inevitability	2) Loyalty, dedication
3) Jealousy	3) Mutual support
4) Loneliness, depression	4) Personal empowerment, self-assertion
5) Mutual hurt	5) Collective action
6) Other's weakness	6) Recklessness, abandon
7) Structural inequalities, political inefficacy	7) Self-objectification
8) Self-depreciation	8) Sexual and physical release
9) Sexual dissatisfaction	9) Sexual empowerment
10) Submission, subjection	10) Political action
11) Trapped, wanting out (of relationship)	

Sources: Authors' elaboration

Having concluded the first round of coding, we aggregated the various subnodes into two mutually exclusive nodes, which we dubbed "problems" and "solutions". Thus, a song could portray a feeling of loneliness, and propose that it be solved through submission to a heterosexual partner. However, the same problem could also be solved through (female) homosociality, or by more lasting forms of social change, depending on the authors' intention. Thus, the distinction between problems and solutions is similar to the distinction between *diagnostic* and *prognostic* frames in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000), albeit with a broader meaning. We found that this general sorting of the data was useful for the in-depth analysis, as it allowed us to better situate particular themes, and how they related to each other within the narrative of the overall lyric structure (for a similar approach, see James

2017). Notably, the problem/solution was almost universally present in the material. Table 1 shows the final distribution of subnodes into the two major nodes.

In the last part of the analysis, we employed the different combinations of the problems and solutions themes presented in each lyric to trace back the elements of different feminist traditions. In doing so, we considered the narrative of the lyric, its structure as well as the official music videos (if available) following Appen et al.'s (2015) approach to songs' interpretation. By feminist traditions, we mean different systems of explanation for the pervasiveness of and potential solutions to gender inequality and oppression. To come up with this set of ideal typical traditions we essentially proceeded inductively again, first approaching the different combinations of subcodes in the sample with a wide range of feminist schools in mind (e.g. Dhamoon 2013), and then eliminating those not found to be relevant for the musical field under study. What remained were three theories: neoliberal, liberal and radical feminism.

Neoliberal feminism is characterized by "broad support for individual achievement in business, government, and other areas of society, and a dismissal of the collective goals' of the women's movement's agenda" (Eisenstein 2016). Strategically, neoliberal feminism rests on the empowerment of individual women, either through the promotion of "talent cultivation" and investment targeted toward female business-owners, or through the promotion of an ideology of individual advancement and entrepreneurship (Eisenstein 2016; Rottenberg 2018). In the view of neoliberal feminism, the best strategy to produce gender equality is completely disconnected from any idea of social and collective justice, and instead revolves around meritocracy and personal achievement. As such, neoliberal feminism is congruent with a conception that makes "the competitive individual responsible for her own welfare, [so that] any failures such as poverty and crime can be sheeted home to her individual inadequacies, rather than those of society as a whole" (Eisenstein 2016). The most critical voices in the debates have even dismissed the possibility of considering neoliberal feminism as a proper form of feminism. From this perspective, feminism is at its core a form of social critique with an "ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations" (Sandoval 2000: 61–63). Given its tight entanglement with neoliberal ideology, neoliberal feminism lacks any reference to social justice (Fraser 2013). The

ideal thematic configuration of neoliberal feminism thus combines the stipulation of collective issues of gender inequality with individual solutions, especially when concerning "empowerment", be it sexual, economic or political.

Like its neoliberal variant, *liberal feminism* builds its critique of gender inequality on individualistic assumptions, drawing on contract theory and individual rights. It employs rights-based frames to underline the lack of basis for the unequal treatment reserved to women and men in the public sphere, and seeks to integrate women where they are absent, maintaining that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men (Mill and Mill 1970 [1869]). Liberal feminism seeks gradual change and considers the state a suitable agent of change, as it becomes the legal guarantor of gender equality. Differing from neoliberal feminism, change is demanded on the institutional level: By, for instance, the quest for women's inclusion into male-dominated professions and equal wages, anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action, liberal feminists seek to overcome institutionalized misogyny through reforms. Thus, liberal feminism is relevant when both the problem and the solution are put in gendered and structural terms, but when solutions do not question gender relations as such.

In the words of feminist journalist and musical critic Ellen Willis *radical feminism* "began as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life" (Willis 1984: 81). The theory of gender inequality elaborated by radical feminists shifts from discrimination to oppression. At the centre of this is the concept of patriarchy, which entered into the common imaginary of second wave feminism together with other terms and practices like consciousness-raising groups, "the personal is political," and "sisterhood". Radical feminists argue that the oppression of women is hard to eradicate, because male domination is deeply ingrained in social structure. Its prime tool is violence against women, as in rape, sexual harassment, or more subtle forms of control over women's bodies. Radical feminists propose a gender politics of resistance to the dominant gender order (Lorber 2012). This consists in sexual liberation, as an autonomous use of the body defying male control; and the quest for separate, diversified social arrangements specifically for women, instead of their inclusion into patriarchal systems (e.g. Morris 2015). Radical feminism is relevant when problems are posed in terms of patriarchal relations, and when solutions involve a wider critique of gender and sexual relations.

Of course, very few songs in all, within or outside of the absolute mainstream, fit perfectly under either of the feminist theories listed above. However, as we will show below, there are certainly a number of lyrics that do approximate the ideal type. On the other hand, there are also a great many that cannot be located within any of them. Before proceeding into the results section, we will therefore briefly go through two songs that, for different reasons, do not belong to either of the feminist theories: Zara Larsson's *TG4M* (2017) and Loreen's *Statements* (2017). These songs allow us to define the outer boundaries of what we mean by feminist themes. They also allow us to briefly illustrate the logic of analysis.

Zara Larsson's *TG4M* ("Too good for me") has the narrator going back and forth between yearning and acting dismissively toward a male lover. On one hand, it appears that the lover is "all that [she] needs" in order to be complete. On the other, her unpredictable behaviour and self-destructive lifestyle makes her feel undeserving of his attention, love, and esteem. In the end, she does not appear to come to any solution apart from urging him to chase her down anyway.

TGFM - Verse 1

I get high all the time
I get drunk out my mind and call you at five in the morning
And I say what I like
And I don't like playing nice
I might pick a fight without warning
But it gets boring
I try to keep it cool
And turn it down for you
But I'm never gonna change
And that's why I be saying, boy

Chorus 1

You're too good for me, but I want, but I want you anyway
And I know that I don't fit in, but I want, but I want you anyway
Only you, only me, and that is all that I need
Only you, only me, only you
Boy, you're too good for me but I want, but I want you anyway

Verse 2

I don't pick up the phone
Take an hour or longer
To write something back when you text me
Tell you, "leave me alone"
Need some time on my own
But soon as you gone, come and get me
Oh, baby, come and get me, uh

Chorus 2

And that's why I be saying, boy […]

Loreen's *Statements* exemplifies a song that draws upon a politicized discourse, but without matching our criteria. *Statements* locates its problem in the oppression and deception of an unnamed collective subject. What is more, the oppressive force is attempting to stifle opposition by the production of "empty words" and the titular statements. The narrator speaks from a point just before an anticipated insurgency, during which the collective subject is "building up for war", irrespective of the cost.

Statements is clearly set in a world of considerable and considerably unjust social forces. It is an unequal world, in which the subjects are experiencing oppression and persistent attempts at disarmament. However, these relations remain unmarked within the lyrics, and it is thereby impossible to say what the grounds of injustice are. Instead, it appears as a call to action against injustice in general.

Statement – Verse 1

Karma, karma, come and dance with me
Read between the lies and set me free
Imagine the beginning of the end
And we don't need to ever talk again

Chorus 1

We don't need your way out
We don't need your way out
We don't need your way out
Words cut but I don't care how much it hurts
Shades for the blind
Can't hear your empty words
We don't need no
We don't need no
Statements
Statements

Verse 2

Mother Mary try to keep it real
Save your prayers for peace and let us heal
Did our best but you say otherwise
We're building up for war in paradise

To summarize, TG4M frequently draws on gendered themes in its problem formulation, as well as in its proposed solutions. However, these themes are altogether kept within the private sphere of individual or monogamous couple relations. Furthermore, the solution that Larsson's narrator proposes consists wholly in a concession of agency, the very agency that she appears to assert through her reckless and dismissive behaviour. *Statements*, on the other hand, draws strongly on a politicized discourse, albeit one in which gendered themes are never openly present.

4. Case study: Feminism at the top of the charts in Sweden and Denmark

Unsurprisingly, very few songs contain themes that we could understand as feminist. The vast majority (55 songs in total) moves entirely within the realm of love songs, whose main themes are (heterosexual) monogamous romances, without any reference to gendered power relations or inequalities. Beyond these, there are also a number of others, such as Christmas songs and songs like Loreen's *statements*, that go beyond conventional themes, without however touching upon any feminist themes or tradition (e.g. Fjällgren and Aninia 2017; Lundell, Lazee and Miinou 2018). In the handful of cases where we see traces of feminist themes, neoliberal feminism prevails. However,

it is not as homogeneous as it is often depicted in existing accounts of neoliberal hegemony (see Farhall 2015). Instead, it is often articulated in incomplete form, at the intersection of other theories. In the following, we will therefore focus on four songs, which we identify as coming the closest to the ideal types. Zara Larsson's *Make that money girl* (2017) represents neoliberal feminism, Icona Pop's *Girls, Girls* (2017) and Gabrielle's *5 fine frøkner* (2014) (Five posh young women) will exemplify the uneasy intersection of neoliberal and radical feminism, while Linnea Henriksson's (2018) *Småtjejer* (Little girls) illustrates the intersection between neoliberal and liberal feminism.

Zara Larsson's *Make that Money Girl* is structured around the narrator's attempts to make an unnamed young girl realize her potential to reach economic and social success. Throughout the song, however, there are multiple markers of ambiguity, which makes it possible to read the unnamed "other" simultaneously as an actual individual and as a representative of the generic category of "girls". For instance, the song is dense with references to "pop" feminist tropes such as female business leaders (name-checking record label executives Sylvia Rhone and Julie Swidler) and female presidents. The core message is that the song's protagonist can become whatever she wants to be ("get up on the throne, that's where you belong"), by believing in her own capacities, letting go of her inhibitions, fighting hecklers ("why you so hesitant?"; "conquer hate"). Still, the song also includes a call for solidarity among women, as Larsson urges the protagonist not to figuratively "work for the police".

Make that money – Verse 1

Get up on the throne (Queen)
Get up on the throne, that's where you belong
So get up on the throne (Queen)
Sylvia Rhone, can you hear me say
Floor to the ceilin' (Slay)
Stack money, stack millions (Slay)
Oh, what a feelin' (Slay)
Julie Swidler run the buildin' everyday

P*re-chorus*

We don't run from the devil, don't work for the police
Stay up on a level so high they can't reach (Queen)
So get up on the throne (Queen)
'Cause you know, they call you one in a million
So get you all of that millions, yeah eh
Now make that money, girl

Chorus 1

Make that money, girl
Make that money
Make that money, girl
Make that money

Verse 2

Why you so hesitant?
You can be the next female President
Livin' proof, check the evidence
Me and you, yeah, heaven sent

Bridge

(Put the money in my hand, money in my hand)
Time's up, runnin' 'round me in my truck
We gon' celebrate, party everyday
One love, that's all I ever wanted
We can conquer hate (Conquer hate)
Time's up, runnin' 'round me in my truck
We gon' celebrate, party everyday
Don't judge, have a little trust
Ain't nobody brave
Now make that money, girl […]

Make that money girl is close to a perfect representation of the neoliberal feminist framework as it has been elaborated by recent scholarship. In the very logic of problem formulations and solutions, there is an overwhelming focus on personal (economic) success, which is a viable aim to be achieved through personal responsibility. The unnamed girl is told to overcome her inhibitions, pull herself up by her bootstraps, and thus get on top of those factors trying to keep her down. There is no mention of social change, even in the cumulative sense. Further, the song establishes its narrative through multiple references to neoliberal feminist tropes such as female presidents, female business leaders, and the symbol of the "queen".

Linnea Henriksson's *Småtjejer*(Little girls) takes a broad view on gender relations in contemporary Sweden. Rather than sticking to one specific narrative, the two rapped verses seemed to us as an itinerary of contemporary feminist critiques. In verse 1, Henriksson makes reference to common gendered stereotypes regarding women, starting from those working in corporate workplaces. In this respect, she refers to the stereotype that see women reaching positions of power only through personal (sexual, in this case) favours. Also, the corporation environment requires women leaders to

conform to a masculine style of power exertion. As a second stereotype, she compares the fate of this successful woman to the one of a schoolmate of hers, who goet stuck in a very conventional life because of "her laziness". Another emerging theme is the social pressure put on women, which have to perform according to multiple gender roles (the desirability of motherhood, the necessity to reconcile their careers with their role as family caregivers). The verse 2 then adds, in specific terms, a critique of: workplace relations, payment inequality, the gender blindness rooted in (male)meritocratic rhetoric, showing how men are at the same time benefiting from maintaining the status quo. The #metoo movement is also specifically mentioned in this section. In the choruses, Henriksson calls for young women (identified as her own fans) to "do what you want, and the world will never be the same", although the bridge shows her doubting whether this will actually lead to lasting change.

Småtjejer – Verse 1

I know a woman, she runs this giant corporation
She reaps bodies with her heels, she's really dangerous
She was shy when we were young, so it's a little strange
Everyone says she's spread her legs
Another girl in the same class, she turned into nothing
She lives in the same city, got a house, a family
You know she works in nursing, complains that it's too much
No one is surprised, we all think it's so typical
She sounds pretty lazy right?
I don't sound like a feminist
I'm just kidding, can't offend anyone
Got to be careful
Little girl takes it easy
Don't act so important
I know my watch is saying tick-tick
Maybe I don't want to have kids
Can I say this without risk?
Stick to your business.

Chorus 1

Young girls love my music
Do what you want, the world won't be the same
Revolutionary, revolutionary

Verse 2

Young girls always get labelled with something
Label them back, the way it goes
I am the quality stamp for swedish pop
But if a woman dares to dream, then it always stops
A queen at the top
The others fight at the bottom

You won't get a second chance if you've got one
You have to sharpen your claws
Because everyone follows trends
Me too, #metoo
"We don't see gender we see competence"
They make it sound like we all agree
But the woman works when the men's gone home
No pay between four and five
It will be better for my little sister
But our big brother, his friends, they're not feminists
They can afford it, they benefit from ignoring it
As long as a woman is bound
None of us are free

Bridge

You have to say it again, say it again
Say it over and over again
If I say it again, say it again
Does something happen, does it ever happen?

Småtjejer moves in the overlap between neoliberal and liberal feminism. It is clear from Henriksson's verses that the problems are generic, and structurally rooted ("But if a woman dares to dream, then it always stops; A queen at the top, the others fight at the bottom,") and that they require some form of collective action. This allows us to locate the song within the proximity of liberal feminism. Unlike the more radical feminist theories, these problems are not related to the gender system *as such*, but only to its surface inequalities. However, when she does propose solutions, these consist mostly of individual behaviours, in doing "what you want" and being true to oneself, and in developing individual resistances to perceived status of discriminations ("You have to sharpen your claws"). In the melancholy bridge, it even appears that Henriksson is suspicious of her own role as a feminist voice, and whether her critique really does matter. Thus, while her problem formulations are easily located within the liberal ideal type, the solutions on offer appear closer to a neoliberal framework, with its resigned attitude toward collective action and emphasis on individual empowerment.

The final two songs, Icona Pop's *Girls, Girls*and Gabrielle's *5 fine frøkner* (Five posh young women)both appears as incomplete examples at the intersections of radical and neoliberal feminist frames. They are also remarkably similar in themes, tones, and even

in the setting of their narratives (the club). We will therefore discuss them simultaneously.

Icona Pop, a duo of women DJs, take the club scene as a location where women are allowed to ”crash and burn”, to “dance off” the experience of hardship and heartbreak through sexual liberation (“Girls, girls, wanna feel it / […] / Girls, girls, live and breathe it / Hearts broke a million times around”; “Some nights I remember / some nights I forget / there’s boys I like better / but there’s no regrets”). Between the verses and the chorus, the subject shifts from first person singular to a third person plural “girls”, locating the duo’s experience in that of an abstract womanhood. However, Icona Pop do not propose any clearly feminist solution, ending on the notion that while the club scene allows temporary release, everything will soon return to normal (“if I fall, I’ll deal with that tomorrow maybe”; Even if it’s for one night”). The lack to both semantic and latent reference to any sort of “solution” and the ambiguous problem formulation makes it difficult to place *Girls, Girls* within any of the established feminist theories. Its lack of structural analysis places it outside of liberal feminist theories, while its nihilism –its lack of reference to potential strategies of (individual) empowerment – puts it aside from neoliberal feminism. In fact, their construction of a world populated almost solely by women, in a narrative structured around broad female experiences, the reference to sexual liberation as a way of subverting traditional gender role, draws most prominently on the narrative styles of radical feminism, even if it does so within the confines of a conventional heterosexual framework.

Girls, girls - verse 1

Don't see your name, I bet you have a cool one baby
You wanna play, just whisper in my ear and maybe

Pre-chorus

Some nights I remember, some nights I forget
There's boys I like better but there's no regrets

Chorus

Girls, girls, wanna feel it
Hearts pumping, overheating
Girls, girls, live and breathe it
Hearts broke a million times, around
We dance it off
Girls, girls, wanna feel it
Never get enough, yeah

Verse 2

I lose control, I spin around in circles baby
And if I fall, I'll deal with that tomorrow, maybe

Bridge

Boy, you gotta do it right
Even if it's for one night
Boy, you gotta do it right
Even if it's for one night

Like Icona Pop, Norwegian singer Gabrielle's *5 Fine Frøkner* (Five posh young women)set up a narrative of partial and temporary female emancipation within a club setting. Through deep female friendships the women, self-identified as members of a team, are safe to assert power onto the male crowd, offset accusations of inappropriate behaviour, and go beyond general problems of inadequacy and weakness. As poor and powerless as they are on the everyday life, the company makes it "feel as if we are flying over our entire city". However, this sense of empowerment and emancipation has a limited duration. Although the women claim that they will "never go home", and that they can always "put on another record", it is clear that their mode of emancipation only works within the scene of the club setting. When the night ends, it's back to whatever everyday life is like. In everyday life, the girls no longer have power over the male crowd, they are back to being broke and, because of it, located at the social margins.

Fine Frøkner – Verse 1

Oh Hosianna, Annotate Hevenu Shalom
Five pretty girls are never going home
The sound of something, setting us free
We don't have any money but that doesn't mean a thing
And we don't want the world, because you and me we are the world
The sound of something, setting us free
We don't have any money but we have everything

Pre-chorus

You bring me up
Can't nothing bring me down

Chorus 1

No one else I'd rather be with
Five pretty girls up in the club, we're deciding
Take it all the way into the sky

If there are five pretty boys it doesn't matter
No one else I'd rather be with

Verse 2

Pass me that thing that makes us feel our bodies burning
It's like flying over our entire city
This song's so good we put it on again
My girls are so stunning
Maybe we are not appropriate
But what does it matter when it's not daylight anymore
Five pretty girls, three in a row
They stand alone, but we do it as a team
[…]

Icona Pop and Gabrielle's songs share many similarities. For women, either in the generic sense or for the particular group of friends of the latter, emancipation is provisional and place-bound. Outside of the club, there is the looming presence of patriarchal relations and generic social pressures, which can only be inverted at night. If we are correct in assuming that both songs make some claims on describing a female situation in the generic sense (albeit to different degrees), then it appears that both propose a radical feminist problem, but without any lasting solution. For Icona Pop, the narrative almost falls back on the neoliberal trope of personal empowerment, while Gabrielle relies on sisterhood and solidarity.

The four songs just mentioned represent the best examples of how feminist themes are present in contemporary mainstream pop music in Sweden and Denmark. This makes them proper material for showing how feminist themes, in very different ways, make their way into mainstream culture, but it does not mean that they are the sole examples of feminist critiques in the genre. The attention to social advance through sexual or emotional self-assertion reoccurs in other lyrics, most prominently Zara Larsson's *Lush Life*(2017), and Jessica Andersson's *Party Voice*(2018). In a few of these, there is also an implicit critique of patriarchal notions of chastity and female sexuality, e.g. as Zara Larsson praises her own masturbatory skills in *Only You*(2017), or as Amanda asserts her sexual agency against upper-class men in *Tror vi er nem* (They think we are "easy") (2018). Clearly, all of these can be read as drawing on different strands of feminism, and on the cultural impact of social movement activism more generally (as Eyerman and Jamison, 1998, argue with regards to rock and pop music's tendency toward cultural transgression). Like the examples examined in-depth above,

these songs point toward the contradictory combinations of emancipatory and co-opted feminist themes that coexist in contemporary mainstream culture.

5. Conclusion

We began the paper by noting the contemporary co-existence of revitalized and emancipatory feminist mobilization on one hand, and mainstream neoliberal feminist discourses on the other. While the existing literature primarily looks at neoliberal feminism as a hegemonic discourse that reflects and legitimizes unequal power relations in the contemporary gender and capitalist structure, we suggested perceiving neoliberal feminist discourses as the combined effect of social movement activism and its commercial co-optation. We noted that the dynamics through which the mainstream co-opt themes and musical genres from the cultural expressions of social movements are not always linear. As such, we expected to find a range of feminist themes besides the neoliberal ones, which contradict and problematize the monolithic understanding of commercial feminist discourses. We explored this idea empirically through a thematic analysis of song lyrics by top-charting female artists in Sweden and Denmark. In the analysis, we posed two questions. First, are feminist themes present in mainstream pop music, as the literature on neoliberal feminism suggests? Second, if present, what types of feminist themes are there, and how do they connect to existing feminist traditions? While feminist themes make up only a small fraction of a population dominated by uncritical depictions of (heterosexual) monogamous romance and sexuality, neoliberal feminist themes were present in the majority of relevant lyrics. The results thereby resonate with existing contemporary research on mainstream feminism. However, they typically do not appear in pure form. Instead, neoliberal themes often intersect with other feminist traditions. This points to more lasting influence of feminist mobilization, and for a more nuanced understanding of a mechanism of hegemonic cooptation, as emancipatory feminist themes find some space amongst their neoliberal, co-opted form. Lastly, we think that the study offers an example for a different approach to study manifestations of feminism in popular music, which could be applied to other studies with a broader scope. Rather than focusing on individual artists and judging how their individual performances express or defy certain feminist standards, we gave priority to songs, convinced that they contain important

clues about the wider social context in which they were conceived. Songs, as suggested by Appen et al (2015), are mirrors-ball reflecting their surroundings. This indeed is what makes them attractive for listeners and worthy of sociological study.

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